

excerpted from *The Days and Nights of the Lotus Trio*

Michael Ives

The following texts are drawn from a series of vignettes concerning a hapless, over-educated trio of jazz musicians who ply their trade in an unnamed city during an historical period best described as the “eternal jazz present.” In every sense lotus eaters, this band of ineffectual brothers, however competent, even occasionally brilliant as musicians, are forever hampered by their own fin-de-siècle fetishisms. They are proof of the obstacles an over-developed connoisseurship places in the way of the pragmatic business of getting gigs. A fondness for cannabis and an addiction to refined banter jeopardize nearly all their ambitions, save their often acidulous judgments of their peers. The prose itself—however informed by the absurd sophistications of Ronald Firbank (whose dialogic exchanges call to mind the snare drum accents of Roy Haynes) or the underground classic, *A Nest of Ninnies* (Ashbery-Schuyler)—means to serve as something like a parodic homage to that dandy of jazz writing, Whitney Balliett.

The arrival of caterers at a side entrance, their vague murmur and mustard-colored tunics among the dwarf maples, gave the effect of a mysteriously vanished culture suddenly reappearing after a thousand year hiatus. I dangled a wingtip from my great toe. Phones rang in the distance, tink-tonk of flatware. Gibbs absently cut a dark wadi into the ashtray sand with his cabernet. He was verbalizing plans to resuscitate the British label Brunswick with some fresh sides by Alix Combelle, whom he had never met.

Our gifted Klaus sauntered through holding with both hands as if it contained the limbs of Osiris a slipper full of aromatic fooj, courtesy of his on-again-off-again Cuban source point, name withheld. Anticipation and languor achieved a fine-grained coitus, like Tajik hiss from a mid-century Blaupunkt, as Klaus engineered an immodest spliff. That spring we could keep nothing in our heads for very long. Though the consequences of our fragile stamina grew in long imprudent tendrils, we kept telling ourselves that the root thereof was not foul.

Klaus pulled a kitchen match, the shaft dyed indigo, from the cuff of his trousers, while Gibbs started in with his litany of fears about life over thirty. “Nothing but broken grails and diuretics from here out,” he moaned. “Obviously you need a taste of this,” Klaus said dismissively and passed him the stick of gauge. I was, as always, repeating over and over again the word “pamplemousse.” After all, what more tart interchange among momentary precisions than those phonemes in aggregate?

“We’re descended from kelp,” Klaus said leaning back into a heavily upholstered loveseat. “There was in Eden a river of beer,” said Gibbs with a tone that suggested this was the most cogent form of reply.

Under a course of false skewbacks, two loitering busboys, only recently pubescent, were sliding between index and middle finger at perpendiculars their joined palms; opening them and peering in, they giggled at what they saw. Several yards distant, small shifting bars of exposed skin between sock and cuff among the alpha patrons lounging near the hearth seemed to mimic the proximate flames. Horgenstahl, taciturn as ever, whistled through his nose as he wiped clean the bar. His complexion resembled innervated concrete dressed with a bush hammer.

“I keep getting these calls from an automated marketing service asking me if I have as yet entered the Winner’s Circle,” Gibbs complained while adumbrating in colorless triads his beloved “Lazy Bird.” “Underlying cause

goes down on abstruse detail,” Klaus, self-appointed sibyl, replied. “Care to elucidate, Layman Pang?” asked Gibbs, acidly. I was, of course, occupying a different inertial system, watching one void split into many, like spherules of mercury, against a pair of andirons, massive and hideous, but appropriately so—it was, after all, the Andiron Club.

“My critical apparatus,” Klaus held up a short but bulging ponk of Jane to Gibbs’s instantaneous approval. “Shall we to my brougham for scholarly debate?” He and Gibbs broke off through a service entrance like the tail end of a mutinous retinue. Alone again, calculating escape velocity from the misery of these gigs at one cocktail per realization, it occurred to me how many times I’d already calculated this value and then and there established a numerical constant, hereafter designated by the Greek letter, Jimmy.

... 12 ...

“Run me out some pool taffy*, Klaus,” Gibbs said, taking a most gentle pull from the Jorge. We had a second set to play, after all. “You boys, such a command of idiom,” Vicky said with a fine edge of ridicule. Too fine, at any rate, for Klaus to detect. “*Mogen David sits—bath requiescat stay—gel defcon vector*,” the words tumbled out of his mouth like wet coins from a slot machine. Gibbs, in no condition to contain the pleasure (pronounced *play-zhurr*), bunched up the center of his face. “Ooooh, thank you Santy Klaus, may I have another?” “Why does one always refer to the Cadillac Hotel as ‘venerable’?” Vicky inquired, unimpressed by the proceedings. Steve Lacy doing “Introspection” issued from speakers somewhere behind grille work depicting gleaners in a field.

When three knocks at the door of the musician’s lounge revealed our hostess, Pinches, I was still shelling pistachios on the lee shore of a mental Encantada. “Terrence says you can start playing any time. The sooner the better.” Pinches, nursing a tetchiness, coughed and waved away the offending smoke. For as often as we had played in the venerable Cadillac, we had encountered no such Terrence. “Does he ever emerge from his cloaking booth, this mysterious Terrence?” Klaus asked. Pinches threw him a look of annoyed incomprehension. “Turn on the ceiling fan, would you?”

His eminence, Strang Kuhlman, accompanied by Monsieur Veins, appeared in the doorway behind her. Everyone chimed, *unisono*, “String Strang!” Everyone except Klaus, that is, who refused to join the general sycophancy. “That jacket is the *business*,” Vicky said. “What is that, cashmere?” “Check, one clean Mongolian clip,” Strang ran a hand down the front of the garment. Klaus’s face darkened. He proceeded to warm up with an invertible Abyssinian mode at intervals of a minor third, *presto e forte*. “Boo—ha, Klaus, drain that Jacuzzi,” Strang winked at Vicky and me.

* Pool taffy: a non-signifying concatenation of words conducive of pleasure

Eventually, we strode to the games in wingéd sandals, even if the wings were pinned back, like a vain girl's protuberant ears. Klaus counted off "Minority"—in Sanskrit—and without hesitation started throwing friction shoes at Gibbs's thematic restlessness. They jabbed and feinted like a married couple at breakfast, in an exchange of exquisite bickering, so deeply familiar was each with the other's line of defense—this while the Veins and I buttered the beans underneath. No sooner would Gibbs light a small pile of motivic tinder than Klaus would come out from behind a rock and douse it with water. Finally, Gibbs assembled a chorus as if he were building a box from porcupine quills, spines out, and daring Klaus to take hold, which invitation of course Klaus answered with gloves of fine mail, and proceeded for the remainder of Gibbs's solo mockingly to disarm, in his accompaniment, the chorus in question, quill by quill, as if he were removing surgically the spines from the animal, now anaesthetized and quivering in submission.

... 13 ...

"Spontaneous Pillary," Klaus termed it. Hayes Pillars would suddenly arrive at the threshold of any given club in his Hans Castorp-style wicker wheel chair and, should he not gain entrance himself, would commence spewing whole anthologies of foul language and refuse truculently the assistance of any passersby until someone inside came to the door. Out of deference to his Old Testament priority, one of us would, by febrile rounds of rock, paper, scissors, be deputed to invite him to sit in.

Some put Hayes Pillars' birth at the annexation of Hawaii, others at the invention of the chiseled axe. "Hell, when I was your motherfuckers' age," Hayes would typically fulminate along his journey to the piano, "I made shift with a piece of string and the gag reflex. Make way, make way, god damn it!" But for the profanity and a fierce impatience, he carried himself like a saturnine anonymous farmer from Maine: chamois button downs, service trousers, suspenders. An odd, vaguely Malayan espadrille remained his one concession to our absurdly non-utilitarian milieu. And small dark glasses, perfectly opaque, severely round. A body durst not conjecture what scenes of ancient brutality were projected onto the inner surface of those discs. Imagine Hamm of the endgame, with a vicious mouth and an inky black head glistening as though with preservative oils. He never neglected to drape a tartan blanket (name of Agnes) over his shoulders when he played, but as soon as Hayes began warming up, one put away all suspicions of debility and searched the curb for his DeLorean. He could for entire sets run changes like a pair of conjoined Brecker Brothers, then drop his teeth in his Rob Roy and go entirely blank for a quarter hour, as though someone had cut power to the source of his animation. And then as suddenly the volleys of abuse would resume.

He assigned everyone a damning honorific (I was one of several dubbed Sir Hopeless), constantly reminded Klaus that he had not “put his finger in the wound,” and generally railed against what I assume he considered the cultural, racial, metaphysical injustice of having to play with “three blithering ofays.” We wondered for some time whether he treated the black musicians as harshly as he did us. Hood Toddy laid to rest these speculations. “Hayes scares me straight to shit,” he let out once. “Man, he is nastier than Mingus with a migraine.” It’s reasonable to add to this account that Toddy was at least twice the size of Hayes, who likely couldn’t have vanquished your average Hungarian grandmother. He smoked a revolting dirt weed he called “spillick” in tiny little pinners no thicker than a carpet needle. “Motherfucker’s got to ecOnomize.” “HEY! Don’t Bogart my spillick!” he’d yell at whomever had been tapped to roll him his bit of wire, which task, in time, we determined to be his approximation of conferring favor. “Gimme back the fuckin’ papers if you’re gonna roll a whole fuckin’ meadow!” Klaus, with a credit card, while mouthing an imprecation in my direction, edged away all but a fuse of tea several grains wide down the gutter.

Gibbs was reading aloud the caption under a photo in the Picayune: “Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin adjusts his hat as he sits in a tree while traveling in the Siberian Tyva region, also referred to as Tuva, Russia, during his short vacation.” “In *this* photo,” Klaus said, then licked and sealed the pinner and continued, “Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin presents his wristwatch and valet to local boy while sojourning in the mountains of the Siberian Tyva region, also referred to as Ohio, Russia.” I could see Hayes’ lips tightening. “Vladimir Putin tames wild pony,” Gibbs said, “with help of local boy while traveling on one foot in the mountains of the Siberian Tyva region, referred to as Bambi, Russia.” “Vladimir Putin seen boiling root vegetable,” I followed, “while reading Pushkin aloud to local boy and pony in the foothills of the Siberian Toyota region during his unusual junket.” “Vladimir Putin,” Klaus said, pushing the pinner toward Hayes, “force feeds pony in the mountains of the Tuva recreation sector while local boy bathes with a sponge his slick flanks in the steely waters of the Khemchik.” “Vladimir Putin drives cigarette boat into pier,” said Gibbs, “while pillaging the Siberian Tyva region after his sudden retirement from government service.” “Lord Putin seen dragging Gazprom pipeline behind rider mower to Kazakhstan,” I said, “also referred to as Russia, during the first year of his apotheosis.” Said Gibbs, “Sky god Vladimir Putin wrestles, Greco–Roman style, with the Caucasus during the fire eon of his cosmic reign.”

Hayes just shook his head. “You motherfuckers,” he said with a pause between each word, “are the blithering ofays of all motherfuckin’ time.”

"Your lines were convincing tonight," said Klaus to the Sheik without an atom of diplomacy, "as is the rutting of musk oxen." Sheik Bevins, who had just assisted Phlox in her brutal vivisection of "Never Let Me Go." Sheik Bevins, lord of the tenor saxophone, who when he let spill his ducal treasury of eighth notes presumed to unite the will of the people. Too busy clawing his way to the top of the jazz world—absurd hummock—to make the effort to parse Klaus's insults, he responded with his habitual, "Fuck you, Klaus, and the vocabulary you rode in on," which, like any cleverness of his, he had long ago, through ceaseless repetition, drained of all charm. This was the way of the Sheik, who interpreted everything from "Jitterbug Waltz" to "How Deep is the Ocean" with Isaiah's fury. "Strafed with Cheez Whiz," Gibbs said of the Sheik's intrusive obligati. "I could barely hear Phlox." "I'm trying to decide which is worse," Klaus sneered, "Phlox neat or Phlox rocks."

Beyond the vast front window of the Crabwood, two greyhounds in jodhpurs were decamping from a Range Rover the color of Chinese lacquer. "That wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that she won't sleep with you, would it?" Gibbs asked. "I have *zero* interest in the bed of Phlox." Klaus looked genuinely insulted. "Everything she sings says, 'The innermost reaches of my being . . . are on sale.'" Tight rivulets of rain fed the plumping beads on the hood of the Rover as two knee high stiletto lace-ups and the point of an umbrella emerged behind the dogs. "Pornstar Oksana visits Shaker Village," Gibbs summarized. While the dogs shook their torsos free of rain, the flaps of their jodhpurs held firm, like collops lightly shellacked.

Across this tableau, the figure of Phlox, florescent colada in hand, moved tense, unheeded in avid lamé, toward a table littered with catalogues and fabric samples where Sheik's eternal fiancée, Jeannine, had established her private wedding consult booth. The Sheik could play loud enough to muster the hordes of the steppe, but Jeannine would appear to be wholly absorbed in swatches and brochures, that is until he inevitably called, for Jeannine's benefit, Duke Pearson's glib eponymous chestnut—"Look out, there goes Jeannine!"—at which moment she could always be seen walking toward the bar along a path of maximum visibility.

"Woman: born trapped and everywhere free," Peline, who was suddenly among us, postulated. "Manny," she addressed the abashed Veins, "what brand of bathroom fixture would *you* take to a daysart island?" Behind us, the barkeep, Sorghum, assembled drink orders in a quincunx. Hardly had Manny spoken, but Peline shifted to another commentarial front: "When I hear Sheik Bayvins play the jass music," she said, "I imajone a small boy standing in a circle he's panted on his parent's front yard screaming, 'I am the Kaiser!'" "Yerg, miles of zinc galvanized look-at-me," Klaus added. And Gibbs: "Sheik is such a peacock." "Sheikock," Peline corrected him. Everyone grew silent and considered the implications of that neologism.

"Confession," Gibbs let out. "I hate the sound of a muted trumpet. Always have. It's pinched, it's small, it's ugly." About Plank Morgan, the drummer slotted for that night's set at the vineyard before the meteor shower viewing, Klaus summarized: "Booze breath and side burns for starters, but he plays like the Higgs." Gibbs advanced to analogies: "Harmon mute is to trumpet as crossbreeding to the face of a pug." "Rashly once—" Klaus, with surreptitious eyes, indicated a woman at a neighboring table, "—she put her hoody-box in escrow and gave me the account number." In sympathy with these urgent exchanges, my gaze traced back and forth a sine wave of tiny globular light drops suspended over the bar. "*Revenge*, Klaus quoted Nietzsche, "*is the will's revulsion against the 'It was.'*" Look at her trying not to look at me." And it was true, his proximity worked like a leopard's suit from which she, a panther, struggled to extricate herself. "Hey, isn't that your dim conquest from the Varnish Factory?" Gibbs had ceased tilting at mutes, given that no one was listening. "She's the last person I'd expect to see on a winery tour." Klaus thumbed a brochure for gewürztraminers. "They must have substituted shots of Sex on the Beach for Beaujolais."

Soon after, Plank Morgan materialized, accompanied by a dark and much younger woman in a naïve flower-print dress. "I'm not late, am I? We were down in the vines. Oh, did I introduce Consolacion, my fiancée?" Plank was recently returned from the Philippines. "What *exactly* were you doing in General Santos anyway?" Klaus stared uncomprehendingly. Gibbs whispered to me, "If he was the 1,001st person through the brothel door, just imagine first prize." "Industry junket, the usual," Plank winked, "more important, can you order bourbon in a winery and where are we playing?" Plank wasn't one to let palaver deepen his grain. Klaus pointed toward the deck overlooking the vineyard without taking his eyes from Consolacion. He asked with his usual titanium salaciousness about the species of flower on her frock. She smiled, nodded her head in the affirmative, and said nothing. Over the course of the ensuing set, I would look over occasionally at her sitting alone at a table near the ice machine, staring off at the lake in the distance, oblivious to the cottonwood fluff collecting in her hair. Her expression nearly convinced me I knew Tagalog, so decisively did it read, page after page, "What have I done?" Klaus's jilt, as she was leaving, passed by and dropped what appeared to be a note written on a cocktail napkin on the table in front of her. Consolacion smiled vacantly and nodded as the woman pointed impatiently at Klaus.

"Man, you were so clutch on those breaks in 'Moment's Notice,'" Plank said to Klaus later on, as the napkin circulated around our table: a skull drawn on a heart—not a stylized heart, but a detailed rendering of the organ, including principal arteries and veins. Klaus had but glanced at it, as one

would an advertisement for heating oil, then continued pressing Plank for more details about his sudden betrothal. The latter answered with his usual prolixity: "I know—one minute I'm snorkeling in the Sulus, the next I'm marrying a volcano goddess." It came out that all the women in her family were named Consolacion, to which observation Gibbs, just back from the bar, added, "Wasn't there that kid who named all his hamsters Mark Wahlberg?" Klaus without hesitation boarded ship: "Pours his Fruit Loops out onto the kitchen table, says *You're Mark Wahlberg, you're Mark Wahlberg*," he said. "His parents worry about his emotional stability," Gibbs said. "He calls their worry Mark Wahlberg," Klaus said. "Family therapist asks him if Mark Wahlberg's his hero," I said. "Kid says, *No, you're Mark Wahlberg*," Klaus said. Gibbs wrinkled his forehead, "How far are you prepared to take this?" "I'll be in films one day, you'll see," I said. "*All depends* his father says *on what you've got downstairs*," Klaus said. "At which prompting," Gibbs said, "kid unzips his pants." "*I call it Mark Wahlberg* he says," I said. And Gibbs, "*Good god, you didn't inherit that from me*." "His Mother screams *I want you out of this house by the end of the month*," Klaus said. "*But what about my booth at the science fair?*" I said. "*Now that I think about it* says the father suspiciously," Gibbs said, "*he doesn't look the least like me*." "Yeah," Klaus said, "*I look more like Mark Wahlberg*." "Mother yells *You watch your mouth!*" I said. Klaus said, "Father, indignant: *He might as well be Mark Wahlberg for all I know!*" "Wife snaps *Well it sure hasn't been all boogie nights with you for the last thirteen years!*" Gibbs said. I applied a needful airbrake: "Where went the Mr. and Mrs. Morgans?" Gibbs looked around blankly. "It appears Plank went by the board." From behind his ear Klaus produced a long, thin surrogate consolation wrapped in mauve papers. Gibbs brightened, rose. "Yerg, let's go catch an ersatz Leonid." And for hours amid the vines, under a phosphene trellis, we could just make out the forge blossom of sky giving off her sparks.

... 18 ...

"I read here that Orson Welles has crabs again," Gibbs said, looking up from his copy of the *Persian Letters*. "Oh Rosebud," Klaus apostrophized, "thou art sick!" We were trading sets with Junk Thompson at the Skew Box. The floor of that strange establishment consisted of many finely planked shallow terraces and dais-like mounts radiating asymmetrically from a center well where the band was situated. Like a Calder mobile of interlocking horizontalities, but inverted. I thought to honor Junk's final set of the night by changing into a comfortable set of alcohol pajamas. "Let's you and I take a drive," Gibbs said waving over the bartender, "when the road lies out in front of us like an enormous eel etherized upon a vibraphone." That meant a round of *Crime Passionnel*, one or two sips of which will convince the transparent tree of life to burst into visible leaf.

Like loose upholstery over a sofa that talks to itself in an Indiana basement, the space around Junk Thompson's rippling lower register. But odd, the C-clamps of every variety that hung on the walls of the Skew Box. Intincted with the violet blood of a slain god, Junk's bready, old school sound.

They were doing "Chelsea Bridge," potent memory pill if ever there were one. With long steady tones, like endless mineral striations, Junk established in my mind, as he moved along the bridge, a cliff face washed by the evening sun in some unnamed Mediterranean clime. When he entered the last eight bars of the form, by means of fillip-like whole tone figures, oriels and intimate balconies opened up along the upper reaches of this imagined escarpment, peopled with the daughters of diplomats and their suitors in the midst of those preludes to love—fingers brushing fugitive hairs away from a cheek, single brief flexures at the corner of a mouth—such gestures as are fit only for the single eye of the setting sun to witness and consecrate. An anonymous drummer's brushes fed, of a fire within doors, its crescent flames, toward which the lovers retreated. A woman's neck, I saw, and along it a birthmark exquisite in its complexity: fretted, looped, involved, and bordered with yet more elaborate ornaments (Junk had entered upon his climactic unaccompanied cadenza). At the center of this florid signature of nature, in an embedded niche, an arrangement of stars as seen between limbs of an umbrella pine flickered and turned.

